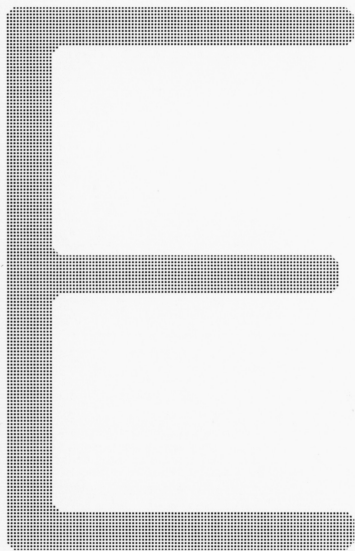


ALDNOAH.ZERO  
EXTRA EPISODE 02



ORIGINAL STORY———Olympus Knights  
STORY—————AYUMI SEKINE

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### 1-1

*Just what are you supposed to put inside a regular kitchen in a regular house? Yuki wondered vaguely as she gazed up at a slightly dusty shelf in a downtown hardware store. I should hurry up and make a choice so I can go home already.*

She worried about her young little brother, who was staying home alone in the apartment they had just moved into. Yet none of the products on the shelf caught her eye, no matter how hard she peered at them.

Before she knew it, fifteen minutes had passed. She wandered back and forth between the gloomy shelves; that was literally all she could do.

The kitchen utensils inside the “Home” were especially enormous, like something a giant from a picture book would use. No surprises there. After all, they were supposed to feed the mouths of 153 children.

153 servings of fried egg, broiled salmon and seaweed miso soup for breakfast, and 153 servings of curry and pork miso soup for dinner.

And starting from tonight, there would only be two servings.

Yuki sighed softly. “I should’ve paid attention to the food preparation drills...”

“Home” was the children’s shelter Yuki lived in. The residents consisted almost entirely of orphans from the interplanetary war.

It housed 153 children, from month-old babies to eighteen-year-olds, along with twenty staff members who ate and slept under the same roof in order to keep an eye on them. It was rather like a boarding school, although a shelter of this scope was certainly no rare sight after the previous war.

In this school, almost thirty per cent of students in any given classroom were war orphans. Even the remaining seventy per cent had lost a family member to the war.

The scars from Heaven's Fall ran that deep.

Heaven's Fall: The Hyper Gate, a teleportation device from the ancient Martian civilisation uncovered on the moon, went out of control during the interplanetary war against Mars. It caused a space-time distortion, resulting in terrible disasters unlike anything the Earth had seen before: the destruction of the moon, major impact events, gravitational wave-induced crustal deformation. The list went on.

And the Earth was never the same again... apparently.

After all, Yuki hardly remembered the good old days before the interplanetary war. She had no inkling of what had changed or what hadn't changed.

Before she knew it, she and her little brother were already war orphans, and before she knew it, her town was a mountain of debris.

If one thing had changed majorly for her, perhaps it was that her parents, who had sheltered and cared for them, were gone. It was all very sad, but she didn't think she had been particularly unlucky. The world—and even just the Home—was so overflowing with orphans like her that Yuki couldn't help but get that impression. After all, there were orphans who had lost their parents and siblings, left without a single relative in the world. Some children didn't even know their own names or where they were born.

It was a sad state of affairs, and the crawling economy wasn't about to bounce back anytime soon. Hardly any families could afford adoption, so it was normal for many orphans to remain at the Home until they turned eighteen.

So why did Yuki, a middle school student far from her eighteenth birthday, happen to leave the Home like this?

Well...

“Yuki-nee.”

Yuki swung around upon hearing that voice.

A child peered up at her. Though his eyes were vacant, it was as if they held the power to see right through a person.

*Just when did he show up?*

Yuki’s young little brother was standing beside her.

“S-something the matter, Nao-kun?” As she attempted to get a hold of herself, her strangled voice trembled with alarm, causing specks of dust on the shelf to fly a tad.

“You were late to come home.” Inaho turned his eyes on her hands. “By the way, are you going to buy that?”

“Huh...?”

When she followed his gaze, there was a large iron pot in her hands.

It seemed she had grabbed it unconsciously.

“Ah, no, I was just having a look, you know... I mean, it looks kinda nice,” she blabbered, not having the faintest clue what the pot was supposed to be used for.

The bottom was ridiculously round, not to mention the pot had no flat surface at all. Did that mean it wasn’t supposed to be put on the table?

Then there was the matter of the pot’s depth. She couldn’t figure out if it was shallow or deep; it was all so vague. She got the feeling it was slightly cumbersome for boiling water—it was too big for that.

She did also get the feeling it resembled that heavy pot she sometimes ate stewed dishes out of at the Home, but judging from the lack of lid and the fact that it was made of iron, perhaps it served a different purpose.

When she glanced sideways at Inaho, he was staring straight at Yuki with the same expressionless face as before.

“Well, this is a bit too big, hahaha...” Yuki made a pointless sweeping gesture with both hands once she had managed to put the pot with the unstable round bottom back on the shelf somehow.

“It’s a wok.”

“A what?”

“What Yuki-nee just put back on the shelf is called a wok. It’s a pot for making Chinese food.”

“Chinese food... only?”

“Right. So I don’t think it’s for Yuki-nee since you’re a beginner at cooking.”

“I see... Nao-kun, you’re very knowledgeable.”

She wondered how Inaho knew something like that when he had grown up at the same Home as she did. Just when did he look it up?

*Right. That’s how he is, huh.*

That part of Inaho was one of the reasons they had no choice but to leave the Home in the end.

He was much too intelligent for a second grader.

No matter what the problem, he came upon the answer unnervingly quickly. It wasn’t like anyone taught Inaho how it was done. And yet ninety per cent of his answers were correct, and the other ten per cent were more accurate than the original answer—a correct answer within a correct answer, in other words.

Still, it was hard to read what Inaho was thinking when his emotions did not really show on his face. Sadness, amusement, petulance—he displayed none of these things.

At first glance he was a child—yet not a child.

When he was with others, he stood out even more. The atmosphere around him was totally different from that of the other kids.

*This is bad news, Yuki thought when Inaho turned four. This is really bad news. Inaho is completely out of place at the Home.*

Being out of place was fatal in the world of children.

Kids are creatures that eagerly latch onto anything that strikes them as unusual. As a result, Inaho caught the eye of an ill-behaved older boy and became his “playmate” just like that. Often, he was battered and bruised in the name of “harmless fun”.

Having noticed this all right away, Yuki consulted the caretaking staff, but their response far from satisfied her.

Yuki was vexed. Even if she volunteered to protect her brother, the bullying would resume in a matter of minutes once she took her eyes away. There was no one to protect Inaho during the day while she was at school either. If things went on like this, Inaho would probably suffer through something more terrible one day.

However, contrary to Yuki’s predictions, it was the leader of the bullies who suffered through something terrible.

It wasn’t as if the caretaking staff did the dirty deed or that Yuki took revenge in her desperation.

It was Inaho. Inaho unleashed payback on his own.

And with a method no child would conceive.

“When you have many enemies, you should pick them off one by one,” Inaho said with an expression not even his older sister could read.

The caretaking staff member, who had hemmed and hawed when Yuki complained of her brother being bullied, spoke up in a grave tone of voice Yuki had never heard from her before.

“He broke the child’s bone, you know. Yes, the foot bone. There’s a narrow path connected to the backyard; you can’t just waltz right through it. He dug a trap there, and when the kids chased him, he pushed them in one by one and dropped stones on them from above... and he’s only seven years old. Do you understand? Inaho-kun is only seven years old.”

No sooner did the staff member frown heavily and tell her about the horrible deed—

*“So, what about it?”*

Yuki barely managed to swallow the objection hovering on the tip of her tongue.

Instead—

“My little brother has been bullied, you know,” she said with a low growl, appealing to them for one last time.

She had no idea what Inaho was thinking when he inflicted payback.

He was a clever boy. Surely he would have known something like this would happen after his revenge. If he still couldn’t help himself, something more serious must have happened. She didn’t think payback was the ideal method. But still, Inaho... her *little brother* was suffering injuries somewhere every day.

In terms of seriousness, a broken bone was a much heavier injury. But come on, did that mean light wounds were not to be taken seriously?

*I won’t accept this. There’s no way I can accept this.*



The caretaking staff member heaved a loud sigh. “But still, breaking a bone is an awful revenge... It’s not something a child would do.”

The answer had already come to Yuki before the staff member finished speaking.

“We’ll leave. From now on, Inaho and I will live together, just the two of us.”

—And so in March, a month after Inaho turned eight, brother and sister left the Home behind them. The spring holidays had come.

The country pays a survivor’s pension to war orphans, however small it is.

As long as an orphan stayed at the Home, the pension was supposed to be paid in full as soon as they became an adult, but if an orphan was not admitted to a Home, their relatives or a legal representative would take control of the fund until they came of age.

Also, if someone had to leave the Home for whatever reason, they could live on borrowed land from the government until adulthood. This was a system originally adopted for regions where war orphans were extremely scarce and nobody could afford the manpower to operate the facilities.

Yuki and Inaho moved to a region that used this system, which didn’t have Homes for the sake of evacuating citizens.

Shinawara, a provincial city with a space port.

It seemed to have been quite developed in the past, but the town transformed greatly in the wake of the disasters influenced by Heaven’s Fall. Local businesses relocated and fell bankrupt one after another, and now all that remained from the pre-war days was the mall around the station, the shopping district and the refurbished park on the coastland.

In this land, brother and sister built their own “home”, just for the two of them.

**1-2**

The orange glow of the setting sun shone on her little brother's slightly curly hair and scruffy neck.

Yuki hurried back to their still unfamiliar home, a shopping bag containing a frying pan and serving chopsticks in her right hand, and her brother's tiny hand in her left.

The frying pan cost 2800 yen and the chopsticks cost 400 yen. She had bought them both on Inaho's recommendation. The prices were middle range, perhaps. There were cheaper ones, but Inaho told her that Teflon coating—Yuki had no idea what that term meant—would wear out easily, so she was better off buying this one. It'd be cheaper in the long run, he said.

5600 yen remained in her wallet. Of course, there was ten times this amount in her bank account, but she wanted to avoid wasting it if possible. They had money to spare from not having to pay rent, but their representative wouldn't transfer them money from their bank deposit until the end of the month. After all, it was their first month living on their own... One could never be too careful.

"Nao-kun, don't let go of my hand." Forcefully suppressing her anxiety, she played the part of the reliable older sister.

"I'm holding it right now."

"...I know you are. I just wanted to say it."

"I thought so."

"Doesn't this sort of thing make me look like a proper big sister?"

"Mm, maybe."

Inaho's voice sounded exactly the same as it did that day when he spoke of how he had defeated the bullies.

It was more or less like it had always been—unfiltered by emotion, empty.

“What would you like to eat for dinner?” she asked in a deliberately bright tone, cutting off the thoughts inside her head.

“Anything Yuki-nee can cook is fine.”

“Guess we’ll have curry then.”

*Time to buy some ready-made curry at the dirt cheap supermarket in front of the station, Yuki thought.*

“...I wouldn’t call heating up water ‘cooking’.”

It was as if he had read her mind. At those words, she let out an inadvertent “Aww...”

“I-I’ll make rice, at least,” she insisted. “We have a rice cooker, after all.”

“Do you know how to wash rice?”

“...you’re supposed to wash the rice?”

“I thought you’d say that.”

*If my eight-year-old brother keeps lecturing me like this, my role as a big sis is obsolete.*

Yuki desperately tried to remember her home economics class, where she had only ever been in charge of food sampling.

Oh right, the rice *did* have to be washed. But that raised another question: how to wash it?

Rice was stirred in a bowl... Come to think of it, they didn’t have a bowl. She had received some used tableware from the Home, but maybe she ought to go back to that store from earlier and buy a proper bowl.

“You don’t have to strain yourself. Today, let’s buy instant rice,” he said, as if once again he had seen right through her.

Yuki sighed softly. “I’m sorry... I’m a hopeless sister.”

*I really am*, she thought, squeezing her baby brother's hand tightly.

He had the small hand of a child—slightly bigger than a maple leaf, but thin and shaky, and just a bit warmer than her own... a young child's hand.

She wondered how his hand had felt when he pushed the backs of those bullies. How did it feel when he pummelled them with stones?

Yuki was frustrated with herself for not being able to understand her brother's true face.

He was her only family, but still—

"Yuki-nee isn't that hopeless." He encouraged her with an expressionless face.

Yuki smiled weakly in response.

That was when it happened.

"Excuse me... are you the ones who moved into the house around the corner?"

The person who called out to the two of them was a young girl around Inaho's age. Perhaps out of nervousness from speaking to strangers, her round cheeks were faintly red. So were the kneecaps peeking out from under her skirt.

"Yeah, we are," said Yuki. "And you, young lady...?"

...*who are you?* She wondered if blurting that out would sound somewhat heartless.

The girl began to introduce herself blushing, as if she had guessed the intent behind Yuki's hesitant words.

"M-my name is Amifumi Inko. I'm in second grade... no. I'm a third grader starting from April."

"Ah, then you're the same age as Inaho. I'm Kaizuka Yuki. This is my little brother Inaho."

“My name is Inaho. I’ll be in third grade this April as well.”

Inko’s face lit up at the words ‘same age’. “Really? I wonder if we’ll be in the same school, then?”

“Probably.”

“Then let’s go to school together—wait, no! Um, my father wanted me to tell you that we, um... my parents own a restaurant, and they said you can come over for dinner if you like...!”

*To celebrate your move here.* She cut herself off there, lowering her head and blushing even harder.

Basically, it seemed she was inviting the two of them over for a housewarming dinner.

Yuki looked at Inaho next to her, wondering what to do.

Inaho looked at her as well.

“Nao-kun, what would you like to do?”

“Why not accept? Yuki-nee must be tired from the move.”

Smiling awkwardly at her little brother’s characteristically un-childlike response, she turned to the tiny messenger. “Inko-chan, was it? Sure, we humbly accept,” she said, bowing her head.

“A-all right! Our place is old and not clean like a family restaurant is, but my father’s cooking is wonderful... in my opinion!” she chirped happily, her face bright red in embarrassment. The way she spoke was rather adorable.

*She must really love her parents—her family.*

Yuki looked at her little brother beside her once more. She shook her head, wanting to deny the slight loneliness that came over her upon seeing that expressionless face of his, so very different from Inko’s.

“Um... do the two of you have other siblings?” Inko asked Yuki and Inaho on the way.

“Why?” she asked back, surprised at the unexpected question.

“I mean, well, because Inaho-kun calls Yuki-san ‘Yuki-nee’. That’s what a kid with lots of elder brothers and sisters says...”

“Ah... I can see how you’d think that.”

She realised it for the first time now that someone had pointed it out.

Inko was right—if someone only had one older sister, they wouldn’t bother specifying her name. They’d just call her ‘nee-chan’. At the Home Yuki and Inaho had lived in, the children called those older than them ‘onii-chan’ or ‘onee-chan’, regardless of whether they were related. However, they couldn’t distinguish between individuals like that. Eventually, it became widespread for people to refer to their elders by name and attaching ‘-nii’ or ‘-nee’ to the end.

And so, even though Inaho had left the Home, he still called her ‘Yuki-nee’. Maybe he knew no other way of referring to her, or maybe he just didn’t feel the need to change it after all this time... It was probably the latter.

The first day they started living alone, dinner was a sumptuous feast beyond their wildest expectations.

Perhaps someone heard that war orphans had moved into the apartment. Inko’s parents welcomed Yuki and Inaho with open arms and treated them to a massive banquet of curry rice and beef cutlet.

Dinners at the Home were lively and fun as well, but they were different from this warmth. Maybe, just maybe, this was what a real home felt like.

“It must be tough living alone, so come on over anytime,” Inko’s mother said.

Bit by bit, those words warmed Yuki’s heart.

The prices on the menu were rather fair, so visiting twice or thrice a week wouldn't cause a big strain on their living expenses.

"Considering what we lose when Yuki-nee fails at cooking, I think coming here will be much cheaper."

Of course, Inaho was the one who said that.

"Okay, so for now, we're coming here tomorrow?" Yuki suggested.

"Yes."

Her young little brother opened his mouth wide, his cheeks stuffed with curry potato, and nodded firmly like she had never seen him do before.

### 2-1

“Nao-kun, did you prepare a water bottle?”

“I did.”

“What about a scarf? I’m sure it’s still cold outside.”

“Okay, I’ll get one.”

“And mittens?”

“I don’t need them.”

“Bring them just in case.”

“Okay... by the way, Yuki-nee, are you still stuck on the toilet?” he asked.

A flustered Yuki opened the bathroom door and poked her head out into the hallway. “I’m not on the toilet—I’m washing my face! I’m brushing my teeth right now,” she insisted, gesticulating at the toothbrush she held in her mouth. She couldn’t bear it if he thought she was hogging the toilet for fifteen whole minutes.

In the apartment the two of them lived in, the bath and toilet were inside a single room. The first time she saw it, she thought, *Wow, they really think of ways to save space*, but when one person was using the room, the other person couldn’t even get to the toilet. It didn’t take long for them to realise that the layout was extremely ill-fitting for two people living together.

“I thought you had a stomach ache,” Inaho said as his sister left the bathroom.

“Hey!” Yuki shouted at her little brother, who spoke without any hesitation or embarrassment whatsoever. “You’re not allowed to say that to a girl!”

Standing in front of the washstand between the bathtub and toilet, Inaho glanced over his shoulder as he slathered toothpaste on his toothbrush. “Why?”



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## Chapter 2: A Spring Picnic

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Every day, Inaho used plenty of strong-scented mint toothpaste, nothing like what a child would use, given its somewhat hot and spicy flavour. He used so much of it that Yuki had once told him off for it.

This toothpaste she had bought at the dirt cheap supermarket in front of the station was so spicy that it burned a hole even in Yuki's tongue. She had misjudged the amount and it brought tears to her eyes.

And Inaho nonchalantly tossed that into his mouth every day. Apparently, he had a taste for it somehow.

She wondered if he was really a child. He was like a miniature adult, merely feigning at being an eight-year-old child. Sometimes, she seriously entertained that thought.

"Why is it not allowed? Everyone goes to the toilet."

"...well, yes, but it's not allowed because it's not allowed. If you say something like that, girls won't like you."

"I don't need them to like me."

At first, Yuki was taken aback by her brother's audacious response, but then suddenly she felt glad.

No matter how much he acted like an adult, things like this made him seem just like his age. *Geez, he really is a child after all.* He still had no interest in the opposite sex and didn't differentiate between genders—he was a plain and unremarkable child in that sense.

"Thinking that you don't need girls to like you—just wait till you're older."  
Unconsciously, her cheeks loosened into a grin.

He was always talking down to her, but just this once the tables were turned. Time to show him the dignity of an elder. And not just any elder—she was an elder sister.

## Chapter 2: A Spring Picnic

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“With boys, they eventually reach a stage in their lives when being popular with girls is all they care about. The older boys at the Home were like that, you know? Every Valentine’s Day they’d compete with each other over how many chocolates they received,” she said smugly, puffing up with pride. *Heheh*.

The little brother looked at his sister with his usual blank gaze.

“There’s no use being more popular than necessary. Rather than being loved by many people, it’s more important to be loved by the person you care about.”

“...well, I guess so.”

Total and utter defeat.

As she handed a towel to Inaho, who had finished rinsing his mouth, Yuki curled her lip sourly. “Urk...”

Inaho walked straight past his sister with his usual expressionless face, not paying any heed to her dejected state whatsoever. Whenever his sister lost the verbal upper hand, her pouty face was hardly a rare sight.

“Damn it...”

In her frustration, she pouted harder than usual. In an attempt to vent, she snatched the scarf Inaho had been holding and coiled it around him for no real reason. His mouth, thoroughly smothered, mumbled something underneath the scarf.

She yanked the blue-knitted thing down below his chin. He gasped, his breath smelling of mint.

“You know we’re taking the train to the beach, right?” she asked him. He nodded. “The two of us are having a picnic at the beach.”

“What are we doing there? Isn’t it still too cold to swim?”

“We’re going to look at the birds.”

“The birds?”

“Yep. When you go all the way out to the sandy shores, you can see seabirds.”

Yuki put on a somewhat thick parka to suit the early weather and then slung on the backpack prepared at the entranceway. The sea breeze would probably still be cold for a while yet. Instead of mittens, she stuck a pair of cotton gloves in her pocket. She’d gotten a pack of five for 300 yen at the supermarket.

It wasn’t like she didn’t have another pair of mittens, but it would have taken time to search the cardboard boxes they still hadn’t unpacked.

“This town has a beach, but there’s no sand on the shores. That’s why we’re taking the train to a beach that has it. It just won’t do unless the beach has a sandy shore.”

“Why a sandy shore?”

*Why indeed?* Yuki thought about it for a moment, and then she sighed.

“Because I love them, I suppose,” she murmured wistfully.

**2-2**

Come to think of it, her first time at the beach had been ten years ago.

As she sat in the train, she looked over her shoulder whimsically at the view unfolding through the window.

Before Heaven's Fall, when the world still had some semblance of peace, she had gone swimming in the sea with her parents... That was Yuki's only memory of her family trip.

Every time the train shook, Inaho's tiny shoulders shook beside her.

Yuki gazed down at her little brother, who sat unobtrusively, clasping the water bottle. "I was even younger than he was," she muttered softly.

*Right. I was even younger than he was.*

*Inaho wasn't even born yet. I was four years old.*

She was so young that her feet didn't even reach the floor when she sat on the train seat.

Clad in her favourite orange sandals and a one piece with a hibiscus design made by her mother, she was on her way to the beach, something she had been looking forward to for a long time. Her father's polo shirt was bright, reflecting the sunlight shining through the window.

When she strained to look outside, her mother said, "Take off your sandals if you're going to climb on the seat."

She didn't want to take off her favourite sandals, but she also wanted to look outside. She looked at her father beside her, wanting him to persuade her mother for her, but he'd folded his arms and was fast asleep.

After exchanging glances with her mother and giggling, she remembered pressing a finger against her lips and saying "Shhh!"

The air conditioner was on inside the train and her skin felt slightly cold... Unable to stand it, she shivered, prompting her mother to drape her lemon-coloured cardigan around her shoulders.

It was a bright-coloured memory that carried the tint of midsummer.

After walking so far down memory lane, Yuki looked at her brother sitting beside her once again. He was wrapped up in his woollen scarf like a mummy, and while he might have done that to himself, he did make for a somewhat pitiful figure.

Thanks to the mild early-spring weather, the heater was turned up so high inside the train that it felt slightly stuffy.

"It's so easy to fall asleep when it's warm like this." Quite naturally, she felt sorry for him, so she took off his scarf. Inaho stared straight out the window while Yuki did all of this. "You can sleep, Nao-kun. I'll wake you when we arrive at the station."

"I'm fine. Isn't Yuki-nee the sleepy one? I woke up at seven as usual."

"But I was making a noise in the kitchen, so didn't you wake up earlier?"

"Were you making something? We had toast for breakfast. You wouldn't have woken early for that."

"I made packed lunches."

"Packed lunches?"

"Yep, they're for the beach."

"Why?"

"Because."

*Because that's what mother did,* Yuki was about to continue, only to choke on her words.

She couldn't say it. Inaho never knew his parents; she couldn't help but think she was rubbing that in.

"What's in the packed lunch?" Inaho's gaze was pointed at the backpack on Yuki's lap.

"Omelettes and rice balls. To be honest, I really wanted to include more things..."

It took time to cook dishes she was unfamiliar with, and before she knew it they had to catch the train. She couldn't include the cherry tomatoes and wieners she had gone out of her way to purchase.

"Cooking really takes a lot of effort."

Ever since their move, they'd been having toast for breakfast, noodles for lunch (or, failing that, something you could whip up in a microwave), and dinner at Inko's house almost every day.

"Yuki-nee has never actually cooked anything. You've only boiled things on the stove and put them in the microwave."

"Boiling is cooking! You have to use a fire!"

She wasn't talking like a sore loser. That was what she genuinely believed.

"...but the only flavouring you add is noodle sauce."

"What? Are you sick of noodles?"

"Not particularly. I only said you used the same flavouring every time."

"Weeeell, if you're having noodles, you *have* to add noodle sauce."

"Right. If I had to say it, it's the noodle sauce I'm sick of."

"...should we use a different brand, then?"

"..."

His silence probably didn't mean that she was on the right track.

Yuki thought about the first time she had made omelettes. They certainly weren't appetising—she knew that with deep conviction. For one thing, she had no memory of putting in flavouring even though it was supposed to be an omelette. She had no idea what sort of seasoning would make it salty, so she resorted to sprinkling salt after she'd fried the eggs.

So strictly speaking—no, not even *strictly* speaking—these fried eggs were not omelettes. They were just fried eggs with salt on them. They didn't even look nice—the 'scrambled' part of scrambled eggs would fail to describe the final product.

The fried eggs at the Home had a sweet flavouring. They were tasty and all, but Yuki's heart was set on omelettes. Omelettes were fluffy and soft, and when you chewed them, the flavour oozed into your mouth.

Out of all her mother's dishes, what remained most vividly in her mind was the omelette she ate at the sandy shores. It was the best omelette in the world.

*I was so sure I'd experience that taste again.*

When she made that packed lunch this morning, she realised with a start. No, perhaps it was better to say she had known it all along.

For whatever reason, she had no talent at cooking, it seemed. No talent at all.

"I wanted to give you a taste of it, Nao-kun..."

"Hm?"

"Mmm, never mind."

The scene outside the window gradually shifted to a suburban backdrop. The cloudy sky was white as far as the eye could see, lacking the brightness of spring, but it wasn't heavy or gloomy either.

In contrast, the sky that day had been so blue you could lose yourself in it.



She remembered how her mother had plastered so much sunscreen on Yuki's infant body that her skin turned pure white. While she never came to enjoy the weird sensation of water slapping against the sunblock on her skin, she didn't mind the smell of that coconut-like scent. She had held her arms around her nose, trying again and again to catch that sweet scent.

That trifling memory was a source of comfort to the orphaned Yuki. *Even if I lose everything, I'll still have those memories...* That was what she always believed.

But then what about Inaho? Just what did her little brother have?

The two of them were war orphans. All they had to their name was their bodies. Other than that, there was nothing.

Surely Inaho's seeming lack of emotion all the time—although she had no idea whether that was just for appearance's sake—was, at its heart, driven by the fact that he had nothing to lean on.

And so the trip to the beach she had come up with... was perhaps a little too simple-minded.

Still, she longed for something to remain in her brother's heart. A memory he could call his own—she didn't mind if it was trivial.

As long as it could bring out Inaho's feelings and emotions.

"Yuki-nee, are you asleep?"

Something tickled her cheek, probably Inaho's hair.

Even though she had told herself not to lean against him, here she was completely entrusting herself to him. "No... I'm not sleeping... really, I'm not."

"You can sleep if you want."

"Mmm... I'm sorry."

"...you don't have to apologise."

The combination of warm sunlight, the heater on the train and a child's warm body beside her was more than enough to invite drowsiness. "Nao-kun..."

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry..."

"You don't have to apologise."

"I'm sorry..."

Gently, he adjusted his sister's body, so that she wouldn't slip off her seat when the train shook.

"...I'm the one who should be sorry."

His quiet spoken apology slipped past his sister's sleeping exterior and was soon crushed underfoot.

**2-3**

The bright, expansive light swallowed the city and tore it apart.

She got the feeling that it had been hot. And at the same time, she sensed that it had been cold.

She had no clear recollection of how much the earth shook or how terrible those thunderous roars had been. Just one thing remained seared in the back of her mind: the horrible stench of a wind filled with clouds of residue.

“Mother...?”

When she swung around, her mother was already gone.

Instead, a mountain of rubble the likes of which she had never seen before towered over her menacingly.

*She’s been swallowed whole, she thought. My mother has been swallowed whole by this mountain of rubble.*

“Mother...!”

The only response came from a corner of the rubble—the voice of a defenceless baby.

In that terrible scene, the boy neither cried nor grumbled; he merely wriggled his arms and legs towards the sky as any infant would do.

“Inaho...!”

It was her little brother, whom her mother had been clutching until moments ago. He was fitted with a round-eared cap and swathed in blankets with duck pictures, ones Yuki helped her mother choose.

Yuki scooped up her brother as best as she could with her tiny arms before sprinting after the escaping adults in the surrounding smoke.

She pretended not to see the tattered, lemon-coloured cardigan.

Yuki had no way of knowing where the adults were headed. Nor did she know why she was chasing after them. If she could put a name on what drove her, it was probably “instinct”.

To run, to protect, to survive—Yuki let her feet take her where they would, obeying only her instinct.

The place she finally arrived at was an underground shelter.

When diplomatic relations with Vers first began to sour, the Terrans did not neglect to prepare for the “interplanetary war” that was bound to happen sooner or later. That was around the time shelters were constructed one after another. They were established underneath office buildings and on shopping mall lots—even high-rise apartments were turned into shelters in the end. The country poured every last yen into the construction.

Ostensibly, it was to protect the people in the rare case of a disaster... but its real purpose was to prepare for the coming war.

The people were well aware. There was no way to avoid this war.

Dimly, she could hear sounds of destruction outside, and at the same time, a deep sense of unease rolled in with the tremors.

Yuki spent a week in that stifling underground shelter. It was the first time she had ever slept under the same roof with complete strangers. That said, she hardly slept a wink.

Somehow, she knew that she would probably never see her mother ever again. As much as she yearned to contact her father, who was currently on a soldier’s tour of duty, she had no way of reaching him. Everyone around her was in the same boat. There was no way of receiving communication either, even in the best of situations.

And Inaho...? Just what had Inaho been doing at this time...?

Looking back, Yuki had no recollection of her baby brother being hard to handle. She had always heard a baby crying somewhere in that pitch black underground room. Even during the odd silence, if one of them started sobbing, the others would join in.

But even then, Inaho never joined in himself.

It wasn't as if he never cried at all. He made slightly disgruntled noises, but it almost never reached the level of wailing.

"What a nice child, so considerate of his sister," one of the adults said to Yuki in the midst of their deepening hunger, drowsiness and fatigue. She looked at the dry-eyed Inaho. "He doesn't take much looking after, does he? What a darling."

That was what she had said. Come to think of it, she had been a young woman, Yuki recalled. She had patted Inaho's head ever so slightly, her face scrunched up in a smile that threatened to give way to tears at any moment. She clutched onto a bag as if her very life depended on it, and inside it were toy blocks and a tiny patrol car.

Even now, Yuki could easily imagine who those toys might have been for...

Inaho was such a docile child even after they moved to another refuge—the gym building of a half-demolished elementary school. For a start, among the masses of people they were staying with, Inaho and Yuki's neighbours failed to notice that there was a child among them.

It wasn't as if he never cried at all. Sometimes, he cried at night like any child would do. Still, the way she saw it, he was worlds apart from the wailing infant that abandoned itself to tears. Thanks to that, Yuki didn't have to take it upon herself to leave the refuge in the middle of the night out of regard for those around her.

Once—just once—did Inaho cry his heart out like a baby.

The day before Yuki and Inaho were admitted into the Home along with a number of other children at the same refuge... a document was delivered to Yuki.

Yuki, only a child herself then, did not know how much that single piece of paper would shape the course of her life—there was no way she *could* have known.

Written on that somewhat flimsy and smooth paper distributed by the school were the words: “Yuki and Inaho have been recognised by this country as war orphans.”

Basically, it was telling Yuki and Inaho that the death of their parents had been confirmed.

They were gone now—their kindly mother and their playful father.

At that moment, Inaho burst into tears for the very first time.

As Yuki stood stock-still in shock, Inaho, who should have been blithely unaware, turned bright red in the face and flailed wildly in her arms.

From that day forth, the only family the two siblings had left in the world was each other.

### 3-1

When she opened her eyes, they were already at the sea.

“Whoa! It’s so close!” was the first thing that came out of Yuki’s mouth when she stepped off the train.

She could see the ocean from the station platform. The view wasn’t just crystal clear; the white sandy shores were displayed in all their glory not one metre away from the protective fence around the platform.

“It looks like this station was built after the war. Ah, look, the directions are written over there.” Inaho pointed to the wall of the platform lounge.

Did it have “The History of the Establishment” written there or something? It showed the full chronology of how the station was built, along with just why it was so close to the shore.

It was rusty here and there, giving the place a somewhat melancholy feel. Was it because of the sea breeze?

For no discernible reason, Yuki attempted to trace the rust on the board. It was rough and brittle.

Having stained her fingers dark red as a result, Yuki pulled back Inaho’s hand and left the station behind her.

The ocean wind was colder in the spring than she had assumed.

The beach’s smell hung over the entire vicinity. It was the smell of fish and of living beings.

“So the beach really does smell of fish.”

### Chapter 3: A Den of Angel Wings

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“Huh?” Yuki swung around at her brother’s words. “Nao-kun, is this your first time at the beach?”

“Yeah.”

“You didn’t go for a school trip? For a social studies class or something...?”

“Nuh-uh. We went to a factory, but it wasn’t really close to the sea.”

“I see... so this is your first time, huh.”

In that case, she wondered if it would leave a slight impression on him. She wondered if something so small *could* leave an impression on him.

Whether he was aware of his sister’s feelings or not—

“You’ll get sand in your shoes.”

Inaho, who had taken off his shoes to empty them of sand, looked rather carefree and innocent, more so than usual. Yet at the same time, doubt flickered in her mind—was she just seeing what she wanted to see?

Yuki’s sighing breath brought warmth to her cold fingers.

There was a world of difference between the heated train carriages and the cold sea breeze.

Yuki stood in front of the unusually new-looking vending machine installed beside the station building and pressed the corn soup button twice without any hesitation.

*Plonk.* The sound of the can falling was comforting to her ears.

At the same time, it felt somewhat nostalgic, probably because almost all of the vending machines on public roads had been destroyed immediately after the war. It had been done to conserve energy and prevent crime.



### Chapter 3: A Den of Angel Wings

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Even a rather orderly country like this one was unable to leave the “treasure troves” on the roads unchecked in the days following that tragedy.

Heaven’s Fall was all it took for the world to fall into chaos.

There was one thing about being a child Yuki was eternally grateful for. Because of their age, she and Inaho fell under the country’s protection.

Every day, the televisions repeated the same news ad infinitum: adults on the brink of death, having lost their means to live, alongside word of the slowly recovering country. All the while acting as if there was no contradiction to be found.

“Here you go, Nao-kun. It’s a little hot.”

“Thank you.”

Gingerly, Inaho held the can between his palms, as if to test how warm it was for himself.

In front of him, Yuki opened her can partway and chugged down the warmth with a sigh of relish. “This really hits the spot... good old corn soup.”

“Yeah.”

She could feel the thick parts slowly spreading throughout her body. “You can’t drink all the corn in corn soup, huh.”

“You probably can.”

“How?” Yuki snapped her eyes open in puzzlement at her brother’s unexpected words.

With his tiny fingertip, he pointed at the lower area of the can’s rim. “I’m not strong enough to do it, but you can probably drink it all if you if you dent the lower part of the rim a little.”

“Dent it...?”

“Mm, to put it simply, the indented part clogs the corn, although you can’t push it back in either.”

“Wait, wait. How do you know that?”

This time it was Inaho’s turn to look at her in puzzlement. His tiny head tilted to the side, as if there was something he wanted to say even in his confusion.

“How? I happened to read about it on the internet at the library...”

“You read about it, you say... and what about kanji? Isn’t there a lot of kanji you haven’t learned yet?”

“There’s a kanji dictionary in the library. Besides, there are various dictionaries and reference books, so I can look things up whenever I want.”

“I see...”

“Yuki-nee, when you’re interested in something you ask someone to tell you about it or you look it up, don’t you? It’s the same thing.”

“Really now...”

The same—was it really the same?

Yuki had no way of knowing.

When they were living at the Home, and even after they’d moved to their apartment, Inaho had shown no inclination of reading a book or researching something in front of Yuki.

“You only research things at the library? You don’t do it at home?”

“No. A lot of books I read are bulky and heavy, so I can’t take them home. That’s why I read as much as I can at the library.”

“Right...”

## Chapter 3: A Den of Angel Wings

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She'd had no idea. To think Inaho hung around the library so much.

Now that she thought about it, there had been a library close to the Home. That said, the book collection was more like that of a community centre... Come to think of it, she got the feeling that there were more specialist books, ones that were difficult for children to read.

Faced with this new information about how her little brother spent his time, Yuki felt no small amount of shock. The shock did not stem from any dislike towards going to the library.

It was because of the realisation that she knew so little.

"...Yuki-nee, you aren't going to drink it? It'll cool down."

"Huh? Oh, right. I'll drink it. Yep."

She made a small indent in the can, just as Inaho said. When she tilted the can, she was so surprised by how much corn gushed into her mouth that she inadvertently drank it all in one swallow.

"What the—?! Wow!"

"See? Just like I said."

"They should sell them dented from the beginning if it makes this much of a difference. Ah, Nao-kun, I'll do it for you too."

"Thank you."

Gripping his can with both hands, she applied pressure with her thumbs. When the can made a satisfying hiss that hadn't occurred when she had dented her own can, Yuki burst into laughter for no reason.

Of course, her little brother beside her had nothing to laugh about.

**3-2**

Time passed and no birds appeared. Not a single spec in the expansive white sky.

Seated on a sheet spread out on the sandy shore, Yuki glared resentfully at the blank sky. Inaho, who seemed to have completely given up on bird watching, amused himself by the curved edge of the shore, digging up the sand around the rock face.

“Nao-kuuuun!” Yuki called out, prompting Inaho to turn around slightly some distance away. “Don’t go running off any further!”

He raised the stick he had been digging up the sand with, as if to say *yes, yes, I get it*.

“Geez...” Her simple sigh was swept away by the sea breeze. “I feel like an idiot...”

Perhaps it had been presumptuous of her in the first place to assume that she could give her brother something to remember. After all, she might be Inaho’s older sister, but she wasn’t his parent.

It might have been hypocritical to think she could give something to him now, after so much time had passed. No, not might. It was conceited hypocrisy.

She might be the only family he had, but the ones responsible for raising Inaho at the Home were the staff members of the institution and the nurses.

She felt as if a weight bore down on her shoulders. Sometimes, when she played with children her own age, she put on an aloof older sister act as if that was the only thing she thought she could do.

She wondered if things were different now.

Back then, they slept under the same roof and ate the same food, and yet—

Why had she assumed that only *now* she would be able to understand her little brother?

“I’m such an idiot...”

The sound of the waves breaking on the shore felt painful to her ears at that moment. It was perfectly in time with her throbbing heart, as if those waves were ushering in a distinct sense of unease.

“...tch!”

Carried away by her frustration, Yuki snatched up a small branch that had fallen on the sandy shore. She had no idea herself whether she wanted to hit something with it or fling it far away. Either way, she wanted to vent her anger through some convenient outlet.

But the branch didn’t fly over the beach or the sandy shore.

It soared diagonally behind her. Her brandished stick flew backwards out of her hand and—

“Ouch!”

Against all odds, it had fallen on a complete stranger’s head.

She flinched. “Ah, s-sorry!”

Startled at the voice, she swung around instantly. A young man was sitting on driftwood, glaring at her sharply.

Beside him lay the branch Yuki had flung—or more like let loose.

Tripping over the sand, Yuki ran up to the man in a panic.

“S-sorry...! Are you hurt?”

“I am,” the man declared coldly.

“Huh...?! How are you hurt?!”

“It’s broken.”

When she looked, there was a large cast over his left leg.

“Huh? Is this...?”

This was clearly not the doing of Yuki's tiny branch.

"It appears I didn't hurt you, even though you're hurt."

The man was clad in what appeared to be a hospital gown. Had he been hospitalised for his broken leg, and then, spotting Yuki at the beach, decided to make fun of her as a way of killing time?

Yuki glared at him huffily.

With a nasty chuckle, the man took out a wrinkled cigarette and a match from his pocket, lighting the cigarette with a practiced motion. After taking a long puff, he turned to Yuki and exhaled smoke.

"Hey!" Yuki said indignantly.

"Oh, my bad. I was so shocked from getting hit by that branch I acted without thinking."

His manner of speaking was rather childish, even compared to the kids. Far from feeling indignant, Yuki was astonished. Could it be that he was more immature than the countless adults she had seen up until now?

"You think I'm childish?"

"Yeah, I do." She nodded frankly. Normally, she wouldn't adopt such a rude attitude towards an adult, but with this guy, it was a matter of levelling the score.

"...you two on your own?"

"Huh...? Well, yeah."

The man's eyes had fallen upon Inaho's wandering figure. "What about your parents?"

"They're not around. They died in Heaven's Fall," Yuki answered frankly. In her head, she screamed, "Oh, crap!"

Now that she thought about it, this unpleasant character wasn't necessarily any ordinary unpleasant character... *What if he's lying about his broken bone and using this chance to attack us?*

Just as Yuki was about to edge away from the man—

"I see... I'm sorry," he said in a subdued tone.

It was a total anticlimax.

*What the heck? He's apologising over this?*

No longer able to think suspiciously of him for some reason, Yuki laughed and smiled. "You don't have to apologise... We're not the only ones."

"...!"

The man's eyes snapped open.

Yuki was puzzled at this unforeseen reaction. "W-what is it?"

"Nothing... I didn't think someone could say something like that with a smile on their face..."

Yuki laughed sheepishly. "But you know, we're not the only orphans in this day and age..."

After all, war orphans numbered in their millions. There were so many that it was ludicrous to feel sorry for each and every one of them.

"It's true that many people lost their parents in the war." He paused. "But that's exactly why you shouldn't feel sorry."

"Huh...?" For a moment, she didn't comprehend, wondering what he was even saying.

"Everyone's in the same boat, so you're not the only one... That's what stops you from feeling sorry for yourself."

As the words kept piling on, Yuki shook her head frantically in denial. “That’s not really what I meant...!”

“I lost an important friend from the war as well.”

Yuki blinked in surprise.

“I’m a soldier. I could drop dead any minute when the fighting starts. It’s that kind of job. That’s why you can’t file away a buddy’s death as ‘something that happens to everyone’.”

“But...”

Yuki did not understand.

She did not understand what the man was saying. She did not understand what she was supposed to say to this strange person.

“But that boy... my little brother never knew his parents. It’s like they never existed in the first place... and you still insist that I’m the only one who shouldn’t feel sorry about that? That’s just putting on a show. That boy has nothing... He won’t express his emotions—he can’t stay like that...!”

*“My sister can’t grieve over her family because I’m here... if I were your little brother, I wouldn’t be preoccupied with such negativity.”*

Yuki was startled.

“Cry when you’re sad. Smile when you’re having fun. Feel free to blow your top when you’re feeling mad. I don’t know about your little brother, but the way I see it, you’re the emotionless one.”

“Me...?”

“You can’t show your true feelings with just surface gestures. If that’s the side of you that you show to your brother, then”—he put out his cigarette on the driftwood and flicked it into the sand—“quit being an older sis.”

“Huuuuuh?!”



She turned bright red with anger before his eyes.

No, she didn't actually do that, but Yuki was so furious that she felt she did.

"What do you know?!" she yelled at the man vehemently, all but grabbing him by the shirt. "It's because he's my only family!"

Surely, the tip of her nose felt so hot because of her agitation.

"He's my brother, you hear me!"

"...that's not how it really is, is it?"

"What is?!"

Furious at this nonsensical turn of conversation, her voice rose louder and louder.

The man poked Yuki's cheek teasingly. "You're a crybaby at heart, aren't you?"

She stiffened.

It was at that moment that Yuki finally realised that she was crying. The tip of her nose wasn't the only part of her that felt hot. Whatever was flowing out of her eyes, whatever it was that came gushing from her deepest self, felt so hot that she never could have imagined it.

She scowled. "Stupid idiot! You half-rate soldier!"

With those heartfelt parting insults, Yuki ran off.

She knew even without looking over her shoulder that the man was watching her with a faint smile on his face.

*Quit being an older sis? What was he saying?*

"Like hell I'm gonna quit!"

She wanted to throw her arms around her brother right at that very moment. She couldn't bear to hold it in...

**3-3**

“Isn’t it rather mean of you to make a girl cry?”

Once Yuki was gone, a bespectacled youth appeared out of the blue. He didn’t seem used to his labcoat yet. If one had to make a guess, it looked like it was wearing him rather than he was wearing it.

The man in the cast looked over his shoulder at the youth and scowled openly at him. “Bugger off, part-timer. Shut up and take the absorbent cotton off,” he spat as he lit a new cigarette.

“My goodness, smoking won’t do you any favours. It’s off-limits, you know?”

“That’s ‘cos the sanatorium is a no-smoking zone.”

“That’s not quite it. Come now, please hand over what’s in your pocket. Otherwise, I’ll tell the authorities.”

“Tch...”

When the man reluctantly handed over the shabby soft case, the youth took out a single cigarette, lit it and inhaled deeply.

“You wanted to smoke yourself, huh...” The man in the cast peered at the youth resentfully.

With a meditative hum, the youth cocked his head and drew the cigarette away from his mouth. “Doesn’t leave a particularly good aftertaste, does it?”

It seemed to be his first time smoking, curiously enough.

“Thanks to this, though, I’m in the same boat as you. It can’t be helped, so I’ll keep this a secret from the doctors. Well, I am but a mere med student who was asked by his relatives to help out with the odd jobs. I’m not even an intern—what responsibility do I have?”

“Heh, I had no idea you wanted an early grave.”

“Are you showing your concern for me? How kind of you.”

“Bugger off...”

The man knew perfectly well that he had no place to lecture a child. Anyone who knew about his situation would have told him that if he was presumptuous enough to save someone else, he ought to do something about himself first.

“I just couldn’t stand to watch her—”

He remembered the resigned smile on that girl’s face when she said, *“You don’t have to apologise... we’re not the only ones.”*

“That girl, she didn’t even look like she’d finished compulsory schooling yet. Yet she smiled with a look like that on her face...”

Wanting to draw out a childlike expression from her, he’d gone and teased her on impulse.

“I’m quite sure she’s furious, the poor girl.”

“Good. If she can get mad, she’s fine.”

The youth laughed in astonishment and sat down beside the man. “You know, once I finish my six years at university, pass the exam and get through two uneventful years of internship, I’ll take over the family hospital.”

“That so.”

“I can’t give up my medical work time, but I can always lend an ear—Lieutenant Marito.”

“...save it for when you pass.”

Marito knew the name written on the labcoat’s label: “Yagarai”. Come to think of it, he was pretty sure that referred to the Yagarai Clinic, a small private clinic in the Shinawara city.

“Our regular patients are children and the elderly. It’s a nice place.”

“Heh. Break a leg, med student.”

**3-4**

Blowing her nose into a handkerchief and wiping away her tears until her parka's sleeve was dripping wet, Yuki headed back to where Inaho was.

The last thing she wanted to do was embrace him with her tearstained face. She didn't want Inaho's lasting memory of his first beach visit to be his sister's tears.

"Look, Yuki-nee."

Her little brother was quick as a flash to present the day's harvest to his approaching sister: a grey rock the size of his palm, with a bunch of holes the size of his little finger.

"What is this?"

"This is a shellfish den. They're called angel wings."

"Angel w-?!"

"They might be called angel wings, but they're shellfish, not birds. I saw in a book how they sometimes fall into the sand like this. When I looked, they were over there."

"They're like fossils..."

"They might look like fossils, but they're not. They're a rare find, but I don't think they're worth as much as fossils."

"Is that so..."

*Not worth much*—those words weighed down on Yuki.

What the hell? If he thought this trip was worth that little, then they shouldn't have gone in the first place. Of course, she knew that Inaho didn't intend anything along those lines.

“What’s wrong, Yuki-nee?” Her tiny little brother peered at her, for she had suddenly grown silent.

“No, it’s nothing...!” Yuki nonchalantly turned her back to escape from those dark brown eyes, and then she said, in a slightly more cheerful tone, “Nao-kun, shall we have lunch?”

When they returned to the place where their sheet was laid out, the man in the cast was already nowhere to be seen. In his place were two juice cans, as if in apology.

“Did you buy these, Yuki-nee?”

“No, but it’s okay to drink.”

“Really? It’s not a prank?”

“It’s fine.”

“Ah, the vending machine in front of the station sells these.”

“You remembered that, Nao-kun?”

“Mhmm. These are fine. Even if something happened, the vending machine’s crime prevention camera would probably take a shot of the culprit’s face.”

Yuki was the one who had bought the corn soup. *Had there been enough time for Inaho to assess the vending machine’s make?* she wondered. Then again, this was Inaho she was thinking about.

“Still, melon soda doesn’t go with rice.” When Yuki pictured that hopeless man buying melon soda for her and Inaho, she couldn’t help but smile. She desperately stifled her laughter so that Inaho, who knew nothing about the context, wouldn’t think she was strange. “Shall we drink it at home?”

“Okay.”

Unanimously (well, as unanimously as it could be when there were only two people), they decided to put the melon soda in the backpack.

In its place, Yuki meekly brought out the packed lunch she had prepared that morning.

She knew how it had turned out—it was a sloppy effort.

“The rice ball is a bit hard,” Yuki sighed as she nibbled at the grains stuck to her fingers.

“Mm, there might not have been enough water.”

The moment she unwrapped the handkerchief around the packed lunch, she got a bad feeling about it.

It lacked the appetising scent of the lunches her mother had made back when Yuki was a child. Perhaps it was only inevitable given that she had made the omelettes as a side dish, but—

Even so, she would have liked to at least make a proper rice ball.

On top of being hard as steel, it was rather cold. If it hadn’t been for the tea she’d put into the water bottle, it would probably have been hard to swallow.

“Too much salt...” Yuki muttered after taking a bite of the omelette.

“It’s fine if you eat it with the rice ball.” After Inaho choked down egg after egg, he stuffed his cheeks with rice.

Yuki watched her little brother eat out of pure concern for her. He seemed extremely pitiable for some reason; his nose wrinkled from the sourness even though there weren’t any salt plums in it.

“It’s hopeless... It tastes awful.” The more she willed herself not to cry, the more her vision blurred and threatened to fall apart. If she were to wipe her eyes, though, Inaho would find out she was crying.

As Yuki hung her head, she pretended to stuff her cheeks with rice.

"It's fine, just salty. It'll replenish the salt levels you lose from crying."

Yuki looked up in alarm. "Geez, Nao-kun, you idiot... You should act like you don't know..."

"All right, I'll do that next time."

"That's not what I meant..."

Inaho took a tissue out from his pocket and gave it to Yuki. People from the gambling parlour had been handing them out in front of the station.

In an attempt to dispel her embarrassment, Yuki took the tissue and blew her heart out.

"I'm sorry. I'm not giving you anything worthwhile, Nao-kun. Even though I'm your only family..." Yuki said in a murmur, not meeting Inaho's eyes as she stacked the packed lunches.

In the end, Inaho finished off Yuki's lunch, leaving not a single scrap. "It's okay, it's okay," he said all the while.

"Next time, I'll make omelettes for you, Yuki-nee," he declared.

"Huh...?"

"You're really fond of omelettes."

How did he know that? She had never once mentioned her memories about the omelette to Inaho. "Nao-kun, how did you know...?"

"Because the fried eggs at the Home were sweet... Sometimes, you made it seem like you really wanted to eat omelettes, Yuki-nee."

"You could tell just from that...? That I like omelettes?"



“I mean”—his dark brown eyes peered straight at Yuki—“you *are* my sister, Yuki-nee.”

Yuki blinked.

Just hearing those words felt like enough.

“I see...”

Yuki could sense the churning feeling in her stomach lightening.

*I see—I was anxious. Just how does my little brother think of me? Does he acknowledge me as his older sister—always and forever?*

“Yuki-nee, I’m your family.”

“Yeah...”

“I looked up how to make omelettes on the internet. The easiest way to make omelettes is with mentsuyu.”

“Mentsuyu...? As in noodle soup?”

“Yeah. It’s made of soup stock and soy sauce, so you can use it as flavouring.”

“Mentsuyu, huh... It never crossed my mind.”

“You can use mentsuyu for all kinds of fried food besides omelettes. It’s really easy to use, so... I think I can make things straight away.”

“Nao-kun...”

“Eventually, when I get better at cooking, I’ll make you a proper omelette with noodle soup.”

“Okay... thank you. Nao-kun, thank you...”

**3-5**

The train's peaceful, rhythmic vibrations brought on a comfortable atmosphere for the two of them.

If it wasn't for the occasional sound the train made as it passed over a rail crossing, they might have fallen asleep like they did when they first arrived.

"Nao-kun, I want you to tell me. Why did you take revenge on those bullies back then?" Inaho's older sister spoke up quietly, causing his shoulders to shake slightly. "Nao-kun, you're smart, so... didn't you know what would happen if you got back at them?"

*So you had a proper reason, right...?* Inaho lowered his eyes at the question. His eyes bored down at his tightly clenched fists.

At that moment, Yuki knew that Inaho was furious.

"I couldn't let them do it."

"Do what?"

"They couldn't get a proper reaction out of me, so... they were about to mess with Yuki-nee next..."

It seemed they had been about to pummel stones at Yuki from the second floor of the Home to see how Inaho would react.

"Why didn't you tell an adult—?!"

"I didn't think they would believe me. Those people always looked the other way when I got hurt."

He had no idea when the bullies would hurt his sister if things went on like that.

He knew that hurting others was a bad thing to do. He could imagine the tongue lashing he'd receive later. But if Yuki—if his precious family—was going to get hurt, then that was simply a trivial issue.

"Sorry, Yuki-nee," Inaho muttered.

Yuki drew Inaho's shoulder as close to her as she could. "Thank you, Nao-kun... but I guess you went too far with the rocks."

"Yeah, I agree."

"It's good you're honest," Yuki said as she patted her little brother on the head. He pushed back at her with his small elbow. At first, she thought he was embarrassed, but it turned out he was looking in his breast pocket. "Something the matter?"

"The den of angel wings is gone."

"Huuuh?" Yuki let go of his shoulder like it was on fire.

Inaho stood up and turned both his breast pockets and trouser pockets inside out. Then, realising that what he was looking for was nowhere to be found, he sunk into his seat.

"I put it in my pocket, but it looks like it fell out..."

"Well, that's no good. You shouldn't put something so important in your pocket if it's so easy to lose—"

"Yeah... I really wanted something to remember the beach by..."

"Huh? Something to remember...?"

"Yeah, since we couldn't see the birds... but never mind now," Inaho muttered, neither dejected nor defiant. "I probably won't ever forget today, so never mind."

"I see..."

An indescribable warmth filled Yuki's heart.

Maybe, just maybe, the only one who thought that they didn't share a bond was her.

Now to cement it in stone.

"Nao-kun, hold my hand."

"I thought we're always holding hands."

"So what's the problem? Come on, give me your hand."

"..."

Not mustering any reply as he let his hand fall on Yuki's lap—how could anyone describe her little brother's attitude as anything but "embarrassed"?

Her little brother was always eloquent. His expression might never change, but he always described exactly what he liked and disliked, even when he made light chatter with his sister.

She'd just been fixated on what she didn't know, on his lack of expression, so she couldn't read him—but Inaho had never changed. The one who had closed her eyes was Yuki herself.

But she would not make that mistake anymore. Never again.

The heater on the train brought a relaxed feeling, replacing the earlier stiff mood.

The indigo-blue windows reflected the sight of two helpless siblings. Yes, no matter how strong they were, they were helpless children unable to defend themselves.

Thus, they could afford to be children for just a little while longer. That was what Yuki believed.

She was certain that one day the moment would come when the two of them would grow up in spite of their will. She could feel it in her bones...

### 4-1

Once they were back in Shinawara City, the two of them headed straight for the dirt cheap supermarket.

The eggs were on sale but the mentsuyu was slightly expensive. “You can fry eggs with the round frying pan at home, but this will be better for omelettes,” said Inaho, adding a square frying pan to the shopping list.

When she asked why he was so well-informed, he said, “It was written in a magazine in the library.” Inaho picked out something from the magazine corner beside the register. “Look, they sell it here too.”

It was a lifestyle information magazine aimed at housewives.

“Since it’s just the two of us living together, I thought it would be a good idea to brush up on this sort of thing.”

The mental image of an eight-year-old kid poring over this magazine in the library was strangely adorable. Yuki fought to contain the smile creeping up on her mouth. She didn’t want to undermine her brother’s enthusiasm by making him embarrassed. She had no doubt that, more than anything, Inaho taking the opportunity to memorise how to cook would improve the Kaizuka family dish repertoire immensely.

When they dropped by the clothing goods section on the second floor, Yuki picked out a cooking apron for Inaho.

“Oh, right. Toothpaste,” Inaho piped up as if it had just occurred to him. “Let’s buy new toothpaste. A different brand.”

“A different brand? But I thought you were crazy about the one you use now, Nao-kun. You always use so much of it on your toothbrush.”

“I wouldn’t say I’m crazy about it. I want to get rid of it, so I just use a whole lot at once.”

## Chapter 4: A Bird in a Cloudy Sky

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“Huh...?! Geez, quit being so obtuse. You should’ve told me sooner or else I wouldn’t have bought the same brand.”

“I thought Yuki-nee wanted it spicy...”

“Yes, but I thought if you liked it, Nao-kun, I could put up with it...” Yuki said, the truth finally dawning on her. This argument was completely pointless. After all, the miscommunication was born out of kindness.

The new toothpaste had a mint apple flavour.

They had tried to look for a flavour that was neither too spicy for eight-year-old Inaho nor too sweet for thirteen-year-old Yuki. If this one didn’t work out, they could just try a new one next time.

It was more fun that way.

“Yuki-san! Inaho-kun!”

The person who halted the two of them on their walk home was none other than Inko, who seemed ready to burst into tears any second.

Slipping on an oversized pair of sandals, Inko darted over to them, her manner clearly different from usual.

“Inko-chan...!” Yuki exclaimed. “Something wrong? What’s the big rush...?”

“Geez, I was really worried!”

“Huh...?”

Yuki and Inaho exchanged glances without thinking.

“You left home so early and didn’t even come for dinner... I thought something happened—! Mum and Dad are super worried too. They’re at the police box right now.”

## Chapter 4: A Bird in a Cloudy Sky

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“Seriously?! They did that for us—?!”

“Anyway, come home. I’ll ring the officer and tell him I found you.”

“S-sure...!”

Inko pulled her hand back quickly. “Geez, don’t vanish on us... I really was worried...”

“Sorry, Inko-chan. And thanks...”

“Oh, no. I’m just glad you two came back... that’s all.” She swung around suddenly. “But still—”

She grinned mischievously.

“You two will definitely get scolded! My mum and dad are scary when they’re mad. You’d better prepare yourselves!”

Thus, the two siblings were served an extra stern lecture along with an extra filling dinner.

“Chinese food is perfect after a long day.”

As per the Amifumi family’s mysterious tradition, the table was lined with a row of Chinese dishes. Even as she was setting down the plates, Inko’s mother wouldn’t stop telling them off.

They didn’t mind at all, though, probably because they knew she was speaking out of genuine concern for them.

“...so this sort of thing happens too,” Inaho muttered. Somehow, his face seemed kind of happy.

*I’m pretty sure I look the same way,* Yuki thought as she stuffed her mouth full of dumplings until her cheeks were ready to burst.



## 4-2

“Nao-kun, shall we sleep together tonight?”

“...okay.”

Inaho slipped into bed, clutching a single pillow the same way younger kids at the Home did.

*Never turn off the orange light we use every day* was Yuki and Inaho’s tacit rule.

“Today was a busy day, huh,” she remarked.

“Yuki-nee, your feet are cold.”

“Girls are sensitive to cold, you know.”

“You can use my blanket. I prefer the feel of my futon cover more than a blanket cover, so I always kick the blanket to my feet.”

“Huh, really? Did you do that back at the Home too?”

“Yeah.”

She had no idea. Even though they’d always slept in the same room, she had never found out until this precise moment—what a shock.

“Of course you wouldn’t know. I never told anyone.”

“But still...”

“Yuki-nee, it’s probably normal for there to be things even your family doesn’t know.”

“I guess...”

“It’s true.” He paused. “I mean, I don’t know Yuki-nee’s weight.”

“Girls won’t like you if you say things like that.”

“I guess...”

When her brother started snoring, Yuki played with his hair.

In the end, they might not have been able to see the birds at the sea, but if Inaho had something to remember, then she was more than satisfied.

Before she fell asleep, a hazy image came to mind.

Pure white birds crossing pure white clouds.

That was what Inaho's heart felt like to Yuki—a bird in a cloudy sky, invisible to the untrained eye. Once you did see it, though, you would never miss it again.

“I wonder... I wonder if one day Nao-kun will watch the birds with someone special...”

*I wish for that person to make my little brother happy...*

As that tiny wish swirled in her mind, Yuki closed her eyes.

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